THE CRIME OF GENERAL 'BLACK DAVE' HUNTER

Lewisburg Farmer Hanged For Slaying Union Soldier Caught Ransacking Home In Dark Days Of Civil War

By FORREST HULL

Feature Writer For The Daily Mail

The summer of 1938 was one of unprecedented drouth in Greenbrier county.

Water was scarce, and on a farm four miles south of Lewisburg Mrs. Moore had her son clean out an old long-abandoned well. At a depth of 30 feet the son came upon a human skeleton in fair state of preservation.

A belt buckle with "E Pluribus Unum" and an American eagle engraved on it, along with the leather soles of hobnailed shoes suggested this might have once been a Union soldier of the Civil War. The metal clasps of a purse and a rusty watch were also found.

Someone, remembering an old tale of war days, said it was the Yankee soldier slain by Mr. David S. Creigh in the dark period of the war. It was indeed. After 74 years this grim relic came to light to recall an occurrence that once shocked not only Greenbrier county but the entire South back in 1864.

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THE STORY IS reminiscent of an episode in "Gone With The Wind", when Scarlett O'Hara killed the Yankee prowler at Tara. The principal in this case was David S. Creigh, a prominent Greenbrier citizen. Creigh was a life-long resident of Lewisburg, a member of the Presbyterian Old Stone Church, an intimate of beloved Rev. John McElhenny, a former member of the County Court and an ex-bank director. At the time of this story he was about 60 years old, married with a large family and engaged in farming near the town.

THE STORY of his tragedy was published during war days (1864) in the "Central Presbyterian" edited by Rev. John Brown, widely-known in Kanawha and adjacent counties. The "Presbyterian paper opens as follows:

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THE ROBBER fired and the ball grazed Creigh's cheek. He closed with the robber and they struggled out onto the landing. Creigh tripped the man and both fell down the stairs, the soldier on top.

In the struggle at the foot of the stairs the soldier's gun was discharged and Creigh saw he was bleeding badly. The man fell but continued to fire at Creigh. An old Negro woman, a slave, was standing by the doorway holding an axe in her hand. She cried "Master, He'll git up! Hit him with this axe!" Creigh grasped the axe and with one stroke killed the soldier.

With the deed committed, Creigh was in a dilemma. The Federal army was in the county. The case would not be tried by a civil court. Should he carry his case before a court of his known enemy? Creigh decided not. Whether with help or alone, he took the body in a cart across the fields and threw it into dark depths of an old well. He thought it would here rest undiscovered until the war was over. He was wrong.

An Irishman employed on the place told a Negro boy of the killing and when the Union army returned to Greenbrier in June of 1864, this boy went to Lewisburg and reported it. General Crook immediately sent a detail to the farm and arrested Creigh, his wife, and two daughters. On a dark night the family was taken on horseback, riding behind troopers, to town but they were not allowed to speak with the father. Efforts of good citizens were of no avail. Creigh was held in close custody.

NEXT DAY the army marched and Creigh was forced to walk to Staunton, a distance of 100 miles. Here the army of Crook was joined by those of Averell and David Hunter, who was commander of the whole army. Dave Hunter, a former Virginian, was at the time, engaged in making a reputation that was to follow his name through hist[illegible]. He marched

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THE STORY of his tragedy was published during war days (1864) in the "Central Presbyterian" edited by Rev. John Brown, widely known in Kanawha and adjacent counties. The "Presbyterian paper speaks as follows:

"We record below one of the most deliberate and horrid murders known in these days of darkness. No fouler deed has stained the hands of our enemies, so often red with innocent blood. We have abstained from hasty publication, expecting the most trustworthy sources. We have a letter from Dr. Thos. Creigh. We have a letter addressed by Mr. Creigh to his wife a few hours before his execution; also a letter written to Mrs. Creigh by the Chaplain of the Federal army, Rev. A. G. Ashburn of Uniontown, Pa. and a paper adopted by a Session of the Presbyterian Church, published last week. We owe this to the memory of one of the best men within our knowledge. ."

Here is the grizzly story. In the early part of November, 1863, while General Crook's Yankee army was in the vicinity of Lewisburg, Mr. David Creigh (pronounced Cree) returned to his farm home and was told by his wife that a prowling Union soldier was robbing the house after insulting his family and was at this moment up stairs breaking open drawers and trunks.

Mr. Creigh had a small pistol in his pocket and he went immediately upstairs and saw the robber prying open a trunk belonging to a lady of the house. Clothes were scattered over the floor and everything in disarray. Creigh spoke to the soldier who sprang up and drew a revolver. "Git out of here!" he cried. "Where are the keys?" He attempted to enter a room where a sick child lay. Mr. Creigh barred his way. The soldier struck at Creigh who drew the small pistol and snapped it, the weapon failing to fire.

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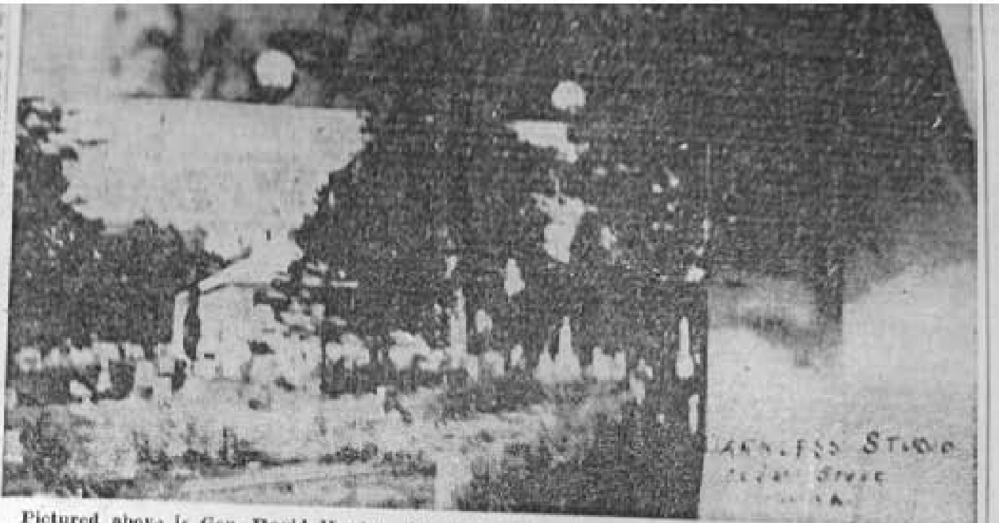
Lexington and burned Virginia Military Institute, Governor Letcher's home, and many other homes. He had burned the home of a kinsman, Mr. Andrew Hunter of Charlestown and committed many offenses contrary to the usages of war.

Into the hands of the Commander of Western Virginia Mr. Creigh fell. The force under Gen. Averill camped for the night of June 12, on Hays creek two miles from Brownsville and on the farm of a Mr. Morrison. At dark a knock was heard on the Morrison door and a chaplain of the Union army entered and told Morrison that the Yankees had a civilian prisoner who knew Morrison and who wanted to see him but that it was forbidden. Both men then went to General Averell but could not see the prisoner confined in a log Negro cabin.

In this awful hour Mr. Creigh received the court ruling—death. He wrote a letter to his wife.

DEAR EMILY: I arrived this evening at the Rev. James Morrison's in Rockbridge county. After eating my supper I was taken into a house and sentence pronounced that I was to be hung. I was not permitted council in my case. I wish you, my dear beloved wife, to bear up under this dreadful bereavement; you and the children, and meet me in heaven. In my sentence it was read that our house was to be burned to the ground but the gentleman who brought this paper said this part would be omitted. I am meeting death with calmness, believing and



Pictured above is Gen. David Hunter, the commander who condemned David Creigh to death by hanging, and who made a disastrous retreat across the mountains from the James river to the Kanawha. Inset lower left is the Old Stone Church at Lewisburg where Creigh is buried. (Photo reproduced from the original Brday print by Hakless Studio).

with your Christian mother . . .

David S. Creigh.

The next morning at sunrise, while the army was moving out, a detail took Mr. Creigh in a wagon to a spot within sight of the house and hung him on a tree. The body was left hanging and was cut down by the wife of the venerable minister, assisted by some Negroes.

Later in the year a brother came from Lee's army and the body was removed to a local cemetery at New Province church. In July, 1864, while the war went on, friends brought the body back to Lewisburg and buried it in the Old Stone churc hgraveyard. The funeral procession on that Sunday morning, July 28th, was a mile long. Dr. McElhenny preached the sermon and the air was filled with the sound of weeping.

THIS TRIBUTE in that time of constant danger shows the standing of this Greenbrier farmer. An article by W. H. Syme, M. D. of Lewisburg, titled "David S. Creigh, The West Virginia Martyr or The Crime of a Major-General," and the resolutions of the County Court and Church, shows us today how the country was shocked by General Hunter's crime. A rare volume, "Prison Prose and Poetry, or the Sunny Land" by Col. [illegible] H. Jones

had consoled Creigh in his last hours, stopped at the parsonage of old Dr. McElhenny and spoke of the murder of Creigh. The Union troops were pouring through the town like famished wolves and the kindly Doctor asked the Yankee chaplain to stay for dinner. The Union chaplain declined, saying: "After what he had seen under Hunter, he could not eat in a Southern man's home!" and said that Providence had hounded the campaign since Creigh's death.

THE STORY of the execution of this Greenbrier citizen is sketched briefly in "A History of The New River Settlements" by David E. Johnson. The wife of Gen. W. H. Smith penned these lines:

When a good man from his home was torn
Days of toilsome travel to see,
And far from his loved a crown was worn
And the martyr was David Creigh. (Cree)

Short grace was given the dying man
E'er led to the fatal tree.
And short the grace to our starving host
Was the murdered David Creigh.

It was a long time ago. Great

Bonnet Boon

by SHIRLEY DONNELLY

Word comes from Mrs. Garnett Dixon, Hill Top in Fayette County, chairlady of the Bonnet Committee of this column, that the boom is on in bonnets. She called to tell me that in a day four ladies applied to her for the ways and means of making this old fashioned headgear.

The first four of the weaker sex to ask Mrs. Dixon for patterns were Mrs. Alge Green, Pineville; Mrs. John Trevison, 408 Temple St., Beckley; Mrs. Ward Hunt, Summerlee Ave., Oak Hill, and Mrs. Imogene McGraw, Smoot, W. Va. This not only shows the power of the press but is an indication the Beckley Post-Herald is read by the home-makers of the land.

After the funeral of my old friend Tom Law, 73, at Oak Hill the other Sunday, I was accosted by Mrs. Ada Burdette, thirty-nine-ish, and a comely widow indeed. She told me that if I thought she did not know anything about bonnets, why, then, I was barking up the wrong tree; or words to that effect. If I recall all she said during the minute we chatted at length, Mrs. Burdette said she had some knowledge of bonnets in [illegible] by a Session of the [illegible] Church, published last week, [illegible] to the memory of one of the best men within our knowledge.”

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a spot within sight of the house and hung him on a tree. The body was left hanging and was cut down by the wife of the venerable minister, assisted by some Negroes.

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“Black Dave” Hunter was defeated at Lynchburg by Confederates under General Jubal Early. Our own Gen. John McCausland of Buffalo drove the invader out of Virginia and across the mountains to Kanawha valley where they arrived footsore and starved. As the retreat went through Lewisburg the chaplain of the Union regiment, Rev. A. G. Ashburn, who

the kindly Doctor asked the Yankee chaplain to stay for dinner. The Union chaplain declined, saying: “After what he had seen under Hunter, he could not eat in a Southern man's home!” and said that Providence had hounded the campaign since Creigh's death.

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It was a long time ago. Great wars have come and still greater wars threaten. But looking back on those dark days of '64, one wonders why an army would forget the mouldering corpse of one of its members and leave it in an abandoned well, yet punish an American citizen who defended his home! And it took a drouth to resurrect from the dry dust of the past true story of David S. Creigh.

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Can you recall when it was said by them of old time that when the clutch in a woman's mind began to slip slightly she was described as having “bees in her bonnet”? I can.